

LEARNING ENGLISH THROUGH LONDONERS

Twelve fascinating Londoners from 1400 to today!



By Speak Street

FUN SOCIAL LEARNING
SPEAK STREET LDN

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GEOFFREY CHAUCER

1340s–1400

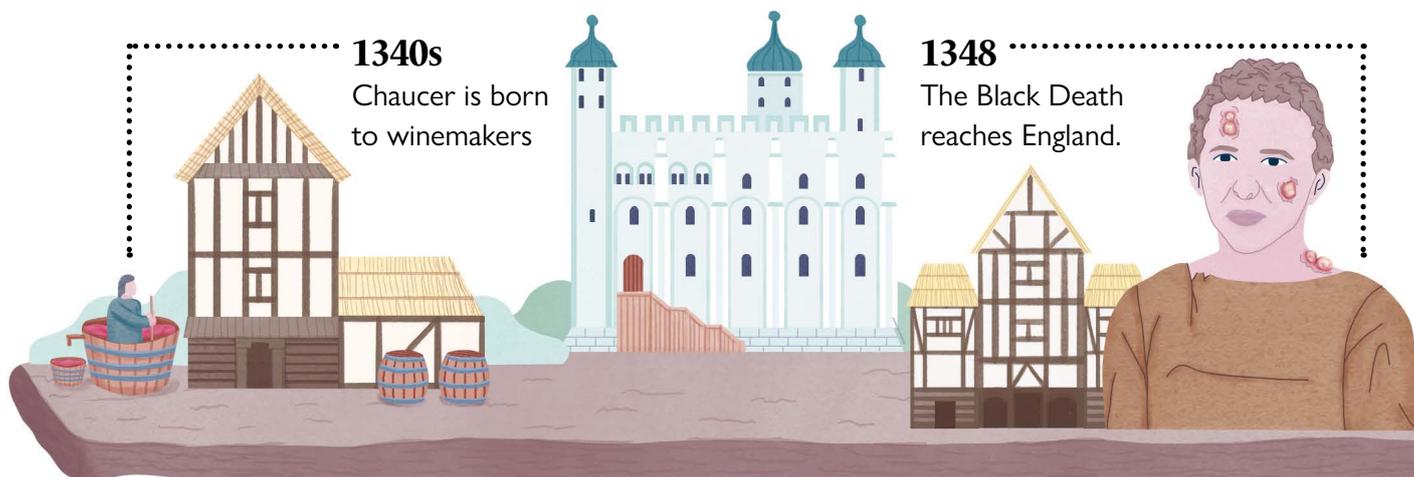
Geoffrey Chaucer was born in the 1340s in London. His family were winemakers. London was a small city of about 80,000 inhabitants. It was a difficult time as the city suffered from the plague, also known as the Black Death, which was a disease that killed many people. Back then, the people who could write wrote in Latin. The rich landowners and the King spoke French as their first language, and many of them thought English was just a language for the poor people. Some people said if you were poor and only fed animals, you called the animal by its English name, but if you were rich enough to eat it you called it by its French name. An example of this is 'pig' and 'pork' (we still use the different names today).

At that time, the Church was very powerful in England. It was popular for people to go and visit a place connected to a saint. This was called a pilgrimage and the travellers were called pilgrims. Although their motivation was usually religious, for some people it was like a holiday. People had to travel on foot or horseback, so it often took many days to arrive. A popular place for Londoners to visit was the



city of Canterbury, in the south east of England. Along the way, people used to tell stories to each other.

Chaucer is most famous for writing *The Canterbury Tales*. These are a collection of 24 stories about a group of pilgrims telling stories on their way to Canterbury. The story begins in the Tabard Inn, in Southwark, London. A group of characters meet from all different backgrounds. They include a cook, a nun and a knight (a soldier in armour). Normally, people such as the clergy (people working in a church) and the nobility (rich landowners) would not mix with poorer working-class people, as society was strictly divided. However, the pilgrimage had brought them



together. The innkeeper of the Tabard Inn suggests a competition. The best story will win a free dinner, so every character tells a different tale. Some of the stories are funny, some are romantic, and some talk about what can happen if people do the wrong thing.

The stories from the book are written in Middle English. This is the language people spoke back then, and it is quite hard for English speakers today to understand it. It's a lot easier to read a modern translation. Chaucer died before finishing *The Canterbury Tales*, so the reader has to decide which story won the competition. He was buried in Westminster Abbey and started the tradition of 'Poets' Corner'. If you visit it

today, you can see many well-known poets (and writers and playwrights) buried there.

Some think Chaucer is the father of English poetry. *The Canterbury Tales* were very popular at the time, and the book made it much more popular for people to write in English. Chaucer was not afraid to make fun of everyone in society and his writing gives us a window into the world of 14th century London. *The Canterbury Tales* are still very popular today and many of the themes in the characters' stories, such as love, money and power, are still written about today. London may look very different today, but perhaps we think about many of the same things as people during Chaucer's time.

Questions

1. What was London like in Chaucer's time?

2. Do you think it's important for everyone to understand the same language in a country?

3. Do you know of any other pilgrimages?

4. What is a good way to pass the time on a long journey?

